

Providence and Hierarchy in Thomas Aquinas and the Neoplatonic Tradition
for

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The thought of Thomas Aquinas was fundamentally and pervasively hierarchical. This is evident whether one considers his ontology, structured by the tension between being and unity, the interconnected subjectivities which are what fundamentally subsist for him, his hermeneutic of Scripture with its assimilation of scripture and theology producing total system, the ways natural and theological virtues exist in God, angels, and humans, or his understanding of the Church and the relation of the Papacy either to the lower ecclesiastical orders or to the secular.¹ His sources of the Neoplatonic tradition which ran from Iamblichus to Damascius and Simplicius work to produce this mentality. First is the authority of Dionysius the Areopagite and, subordinately, Boethius, the *Liber de Causis*—at Paris among the writings of Aristotle listed for lecture—, and later Ammonius, Simplicius and Proclus themselves, as well as others. Either assisting those authorities or counterbalancing them in producing this frame of mind are Augustine, Aristotle and the Peripatetics.

A. The *Lex Divinitatis*

From his first Biblical commentary, the *Expositio super Isaiam ad Litteram*, through his commentary on the *Sentences*,² to his last system, the *Summa Theologiae*, and his late exposition of St. Paul's epistles, St. Thomas Aquinas denied the literal sense of Isaiah VI.6 because it contradicted Dionysius on the hierarchy of the angels.³ Despite the text, no seraph flew to Isaiah. It was impossible that one from among the superior orders of angels could minister immediately and directly to a creature below the angelic hierarchy. In this denial Aquinas is explicit that he is following the authority of Dionysius. In his *Sentences Commentary*, when giving reasons, he refers to “the disposition of the Divine Wisdom” which operates in accord with an invariable divine law requiring that “the lower is led back to the higher through middle terms.”⁴

When, about a decade later, Thomas finalized his *Exposition of the De Divinis Nominibus*, he speaks of the Divine Wisdom acting in this way as giving an order to being. God “leads things into being, and not only gives *esse* to things, but also *esse* comes with order in things” so far as they are joined according to the *Lex divinitatis*: “Because ‘always the end of the first things’, that is, the bottom of the highest, is joined to the ‘first beings of the

¹ On these see my *God in Himself: Aquinas' Doctrine of God as Expounded in the Summa Theologiae*, Oxford Theological Monographs / Oxford Scholarly Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987 / 2000), 3–12 & 57–80; idem, “Aquinas, Pseudo-Denys, Proclus and Isaiah VI.6,” *Archives d'histoire doctrinale et littéraire du Moyen Âge*, 64 (1997): 59–93; idem, “Political, Psychic, Intellectual, Daimonic, Hierarchical, Cosmic, and Divine: Justice in Aquinas, Al-Fârâbî, Dionysius, and Porphyry,” *Dionysius* 21 (2003): 197–218; idem, “Dionysius dixit, Lex divinitatis est ultima per media reducere: Aquinas, hierocracy and the ‘augustinisme politique’,” in *Tommaso D'Aquino: proposte nuove di lettura. Festschrift Antonio Tognolo*, edited Ilario Tolomio, *Medioevo*, 18 (1992): 119–150.

² Aquinas, *In Quatuor Libros Sententiarum*, in *Corpus Thomisticum*, by Roberto Busa SJ and associates web edition by Eduardo Bernot and Enrique Alarcón, lib. 2 d. 10 q. 1 a. 2 co.

³ Aquinas, *Expositio super Isaiam ad Litteram*, in *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. 28 (Rome: Editori di San Tommaso, 1974), capitulum VI, 6-8, p. 51. idem, *Summa Theologiae* (Ottawa: Commissio Piana 1953), I.112 (hereinafter *ST*).

⁴ See also Aquinas, *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 10 q. 1 a. 2 s.c. 1 and lib. 2 d. 10 q. 1 a. 3, ag. 6 and ad 3.

second', that is, to the highest beings of the lower."⁵ In his *Exposition of the Liber de Causis*, he quotes this statement of the Law when commenting on Proposition 19 which gives a Platonic account of the order of rational beings. It distinguishes between, and connects in a descending causal chain, *intelligentia divina*, *intelligentia tantum*, *anima intelligibilis*, and *anima tantum*, from which we arrive at *corpora naturalia tantum*. Thomas' explanation refers us to proposition 106 of the *Elements* (on intermediates between what is wholly eternal and what is in time) and then to the *De Divinis Nominibus*.⁶ He makes the categories and hierarchies of Proclus, of the *Liber*, and of Dionysius cohere.

The origin of the *Lex divinitatis* is, in fact, Iamblichus, and in respect to the mediated activity of the highest created spirits, it functions so that nothing detracts from the nobility of the higher when it cares for inferiors. My intention here is not to survey this aspect of Thomas' works but rather to look at how hierarchy goes with providence for him primarily, though not exclusively, in his *Treatise on Separate Substances* which reflects his rich knowledge of, and some confusions about, Platonism in the last years of his writing. I shall also move back from Aquinas to consider how hierarchy and providence are connected in earlier philosophical theologians in the Neoplatonic tradition on whom he depends.

B. Aquinas' *Treatise on Separate Substances*: Preliminaries to Providence

The more Thomas Aquinas knew about Neoplatonism the more he assimilated its conceptions and modes of thought. Nowhere is there greater evidence for this than in his last major treatment of providence set out in his *Treatise on Separate Substances*. It was composed after the Condemnation of 1270 and reflects its propositions. Thomas wrote it at the same time as his *Exposition of the Liber de Causis*, in which he compared the *Liber* to the Dionysian corpus and the *Elements of Theology* of Proclus, the latter translated by William of Moerbeke in 1268. He had started his *Expositio Libri Peryermeias*, which he left unfinished and in which he employed a commentary by the Neoplatonic conciliator of Plato and Aristotle, Ammonius, on the same work of Aristotle which had also been translated by Moerbeke.⁷ His *Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus* was written in the same period. It and other writings contain a hierarchical doctrine of the virtues derived from Plotinus via Porphyry and Simplicius, two more Neoplatonic conciliators.

In his *Super de Causis*, Thomas identifies the *Liber* as excerpted by Arab philosophers from the *Elements*, and, after this, he did not cite the *Liber* as an authority again. His motive was not, however, that he rejected the Neoplatonic philosophical principles he had imbibed from it and had used for decades. Indeed, the evidence points in the opposite direction. An intimate knowledge of these three texts, one by Proclus, the other two strongly under his influence, is evident in *De Substantiis Separatis*. Beginning about 1266, Aquinas started reaping

⁵ Aquinas, *Expositio in Librum Beati Dionysii De Divinis Nominibus*, ed. C. Pera (Turin / Rome, Marietti, 1950), VII, iv, §733, p. 275. On Dionysius as teaching Aquinas to understand *esse* as ordered see R. te Velde, *Participation and Substantiality in Thomas Aquinas*, Studien und Texte zur Geistesgeschichte des Mittelalters xlvii (Leiden: Brill, 1995).

⁶ Aquinas, *Super Librum De Causis Expositio*, ed. H.-D. Saffrey, 2nd edition corrigée (Paris: Vrin, 2002), prop. 19, pp. 104–107.

⁷ Ammonius, *Commentaire sur le Peri Hermeneias d'Aristote. Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke*, édition critique et étude sur l'utilisation du Commentaire dans l'oeuvre de saint Thomas par G. Verbeke, Corpus Latinum Commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum 2 (Louvain/Paris: Publications Universitaires de Louvain/Éditions Béatrice Nauwelaerts, 1961). Moerbeke finished translating it on 12 May 1268 four months after he finished his translation of the *Elements*. On Thomas' use of it, see also R.-A. Gauthier in Aquinas, *Expositio Libri Peryermeias*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. I.1 Editio altera retractata (Rome / Paris: Commissio Leonina / Vrin, 1989), 81*–88*.

the benefits of working through important works of Aristotle in new translations by Moerbeke and, even more importantly, looking at philosophy and theology through the perspectives of the Greek commentators of Late Antiquity: Alexander of Aphrodisias, Themistius, and most importantly for our purposes here, Simplicius and Ammonius. They enabled him to get back behind both the Latins and the Arabs so that Thomas felt he had reached the sources of philosophy. Significantly for our particular interest, in the Treatise he takes up his consideration of providence after he has refuted the error “that all spiritual substances are created equal.”⁸ There are also other preliminaries which connect providence and hierarchy.

Aquinas begins his Treatise with the opinions of the Ancient Physicists and Plato. He concludes his first chapter by listing the “four orders” which Plato posits between us and the highest God: “second gods, separated intellects, celestial souls, and good and bad daemons.”⁹ In the next chapter, when considering Aristotle’s opinion, Thomas expressed his preference for Plato over Aristotle on the kinds and numbers of separated substances.¹⁰ On the principles by which the numbers are determined, on the purpose and nature of their being, and on the existence of daemons which lie outside what he takes as Aristotle’s two-fold order of separated substances, Thomas sides with the Platonists, as represented by Augustine, Dionysius, and others, pagan and Christian. Thus, the population of Thomas’ realm of spiritual secondary causes by which providence acts has a good deal in common with that of pagan Neoplatonists. He goes on from the difference of Plato and Aristotle on kinds and numbers to assert their agreement (*convenientia*) on the nature of providence. For him, Proclus in the *Elements*, supplemented by Nemesius, *De natura hominis*, Augustine’s *De Civitate Dei*, and the *Liber de Causis*, give Plato’s position and Thomas outlines it first. Aristotle, with his less adequate spiritual apparatus, is required to fit within the Platonic schema. Because the highest God is also one itself and good itself “it has the property from the primaeval nature of goodness to have providence over all inferior things.”¹¹ Crucially for constituting a hierarchy, to the degree that each of the lower participates in the goodness of the first good, it also exercises providence over what comes after it. This works out both within the realm of separate intellects and in the realm of souls. The daemons enter here: “The Platonists placed the souls of daemons as mediators between us and superior substances.”¹²

Because the universal causality of God, his knowledge, and his providence, are tightly connected, we should note another *convenientia* between Plato and Aristotle Thomas constructed before we move back to looking at his treatment of providence. One of the most significant changes in Aquinas’ mind reached its perfection in *De Substantiis Separatis*. There he definitively reversed his earlier and persistent judgment of Plato on *creatio ex nihilo*, joining him with Aristotle. In doing this he not only unites himself with a characteristic project of Late Ancient Neoplatonism (and its Arabic heirs) but also states the doctrine in Platonic language. Thomas’ position changed as he passed from early works where Plato was

⁸ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cura et studio Fratrum Praedicatorum, *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. xl, D (Roma : Commissio Leonina, 1968), cap. 12, p. D62.

⁹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 1, p. D 43, lines 184-187; see for other lists, Aquinas, *In Aristotelis Libros de Caelo et Mundo Expositio*, in idem, *In Aristotelis Libros de Caelo et Mundo, de Generatione et Corruptione, Meteorologicorum Expositio*, vol. I, ed. R.M. Spiazzi (Turin/ Rome: Marietti, 1952), II, iv, § 336, p. 163 and *Super De Causis*; prop. 3, pp. 18–20.

¹⁰ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 2, p. D 45, lines 97-100.

¹¹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 3, p. D 46, lines 41-44.

¹² Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 3, p. D 47, lines 58-59.

set against Aristotle on the matter, to the *Summa theologiae*, which is ambiguous,¹³ to his *Exposition of Aristotle's Physics*, where, as opposed to the “Old Naturalists”, both are found to have arrived at “a knowledge of the principle of all existence.”¹⁴ His itinerarium ends at the *Treatise on Separate Substances*, where the convergence of the two greatest philosophical authorities is placed in the context of uniting them as far as possible on the existence, nature, and providence of substances separate from matter. Thomas reports that: “According to the opinion of Plato and Aristotle... *esse* is bestowed on the whole universe of things by a first being which is its own being.”¹⁵ He states this doctrine in a form which is more Platonic than Aristotelian. The First Principle is called *simplicissimum*, and Thomas argues that “because subsistent being must be one ... it is necessary that all other things which are under it exist in the way they do as participants in *esse*”.¹⁶ His *Exposition of the Liber de Causis* shows that, having looked at Plato more and more in Neoplatonic terms, Thomas understood Platonic hierarchy in terms of an absolute subordination and derivation of all else from the One. Even if the Platonists “posited many gods ordered under one” rather than, as we do, “positing one only having all things in itself,” everyone agrees “universality of causality belongs to God.”¹⁷

The notion that Aristotle taught a doctrine of creation was developed among the late Antique conciliators of Plato and Aristotle. The Platonists need to draw together the pagan *Genesis*, the *Timaeus*,¹⁸ and its “Demiurge” with Aristotle’s *Physics* and his Unmoved Mover. To do this they must find some way of reconciling Aristotle’s eternal universe with that in the *Timaeus*, which is, as Aquinas had discerned in his *Exposition of the De Caelo*, written just before the *On Separate Substances*,¹⁹ generated and corruptible, though perpetual because it is held in being by the divine will. Aquinas commented on the *De Caelo* under the sway of one of that most determined Neoplatonic conciliator, Simplicius, imitating his teacher Ammonius, and great parts of Thomas’ exposition are lifted from that of the 6th-century Neoplatonist.²⁰ Aquinas worked with two of his conciliating commentaries, both translated by William of Moerbeke and finished in 1266 and 1271 respectively.²¹ Although Simplicius’ conciliation had reached Aquinas far earlier by way of Averroes and others, it is only now, near the end of his writing, when he has this Greek source for important parts of the project, that he fully joins in its spirit.

C. Aquinas’ *Treatise on Separate Substances*: Providence

¹³ Aquinas, *ST* 1.15.3 ad 3 and ad 4 and *ST* 1.44 articles 1 & 2. See Mark Johnson “Aquinas’ Changing Evaluation of Plato on Creation,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 66:1 (1992): 81–88 at 84–87.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *In Octo Libros Physicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. P.M. Maggiolo (Turin/ Rome: Marietti, 1965), VIII, ii, § 975, p. 506. See also VIII, ii, §974 where he speaks of Aristotle and *plures Platoniorum*.

¹⁵ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 9, D 57, lines 103-118.

¹⁶ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 9, p. D 57, lines 103-110.

¹⁷ Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, prop. 19, p. 106, lines 13-17.

¹⁸ See P. Hadot, “Physique et poésie dans le *Timée* de Platon,” in idem, *Études de philosophie ancienne*, L’ane d’or (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1998), 277.

¹⁹ Aquinas, *In de Caelo*, I, xxiii, § 236, p. 113; I, xxix § 283, p. 138.

²⁰ See W.J. Hankey, “Thomas’ Neoplatonic Histories: His following of Simplicius,” *Dionysius* 20 (2002): 153–178 and Michael Chase, “The Medieval Posterity of Simplicius’ Commentary on the *Categories*: Thomas Aquinas and al-Farabi,” *Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle’s Categories*, ed. Lloyd A. Newton (Leiden/ Boston: Brill, 2008), 9–29.

²¹ Simplicius, *Commentaire sur les Catégories d’Aristote*, Traduction de Guillaume de Moerbeke, ed. A. Pattin, 2 volumes, Corpus Latinorum commentariorum in Aristotelem Graecorum 1-2 (vol. 1, Louvain/Paris, 1971, vol. 2 Leiden, 1975) and *Commentaria in quatuor libros de celo Aristotelis*, Guillermo Morbeto Interprete (Venice: apud H. Scotum, 1540).

When Aquinas moves on to consider the knowledge and providence of separate substances, he sets out to refute positions condemned in 1270, which denied knowledge and, consequently, providence, to God in respect to singulars. Aquinas attributes the errors to a failure to preserve hierarchy and difference in knowing; they stem from “wanting to judge the intelligence and operation of spiritual substances after the manner of human intelligence and operation.”²² In respect to our misjudgements about providence and predestination, Aquinas shares this diagnosis with Neoplatonists; for example, Eriugena, who, like himself, had Boethius in the *Consolation of Philosophy* as source both of the analysis and of a solution. Eriugena concluded that a problem in our reasoning arises when “foreknowledge and predestination are transferred to God by likening him to temporal things.”²³ In order both to properly distinguish the vision of divine providence from human reason, and to allow a human free movement choosing the higher or the lower, Boethius sketched a hierarchy of forms of apprehension. He distinguishes in an ordered series: *sensus, imagination, ratio, intelligentia* and maintains that the higher include the lower but not the contrary.²⁴ Earlier he imagined the series as concentric spheres rotating at ever increasing rates as we pass outward from the fixed simplicity of the eternal divine plan around which they turn as their unmoved mover.²⁵

Aquinas defends a Platonic doctrine by Neoplatonic means. Platonists followed the *Laws*, which taught that “the gods perceive, see, and hear everything, nothing is able to escape them which falls within sense or knowledge” and these gods “are more, not less, careful for small things than for great”.²⁶ The Peripatetics work in the wake of opposing Aristotelian doctrines and *aporiae*. The *Nicomachean Ethics* teaches that the gods take pleasure in intellectual activity and that they favour those humans who most exercise it. In company with the Arabic Peripatetics, Moses Maimonides worked out the consequences of this in his *Guide of the Perplexed* by making the care of providence directly proportional to human intellectual development, ascent, attention, and union with the divine intellectual overflow. This produces a Peripatetic hierarchy.²⁷

Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* is, however, at best, aporetic on the divine knowledge and governance of individuals.²⁸ Aristotle’s Peripatetic followers are forced to make a choice. Pushing them is their master’s identification of knower and known. For Alexander of Aphrodisias, because intellect has itself as its object, the divine intellects could not know changeable particulars: “every intellect...comes to be in a way the same as its object.”²⁹ This would seem to prevent the gods from retaining their characteristics of perfection and foreknowledge. The Peripatetics choose to keep providence free from the care of individuals and of intervention for or against them. Another doctrine of Aristotle prevents finding a solution to this problem among the Peripatetics: the infinite is measureless both in itself and

²² Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 13, p. D 64, lines 8-11.

²³ Eriugena, *De Divina Praedestinatione liber*, ed. G. Madec, Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis 50 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1978), XI.7 393B.

²⁴ Boethius, *Consolatio philosophiae*, ed. and trans. E.K. Rand and S.J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1973), V.iv, p. 410, ll. 83-84.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, IV.vi.

²⁶ Plato, *Leges* X, 901d and 900d.

²⁷ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), III, caps. 17, 18, and 51.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Nico. Ethica* X.viii 1179a28ff and *Metaphysica* XII. ix & x.

²⁹ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *Quaestiones* 1.1-2.15, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 1992), *Quaestio* 1.25, p. 83.

by the gods.³⁰ So eternity is endless succession. However, except when he is commenting on Dionysius, explicit criticism by Aquinas of the Peripatetics on providence is either indirect and reluctant or confused.³¹

Proclus' sights are trained on Alexander of Aphrodisias and the Peripatetics when, as part of his endeavour to defend both universal divine *pronoia* and human freedom, he criticises those who hold that: "it is not true that god knows all things in a determinate manner." Instead, "they declare that god himself is undetermined regarding things that happen in an indeterminate way, so that they may preserve what is contingent."³² Carlos Steel judges, however, that the (correct) identification of this position as Peripatetic in the *De Providentia* is a gloss which has been taken into the text.³³ Maimonides is comparatively well informed among mediaevals, perhaps in part because Alexander of Aphrodisias' treatise *On Providence* survived only in an Arabic translation. In any case, Vernon Bourke judges that Maimonides is the source for Aquinas' report in the *Summa contra Gentiles* of the error that providence does not extend to corruptible things.³⁴ Significantly, however, Thomas does not identify this position as Peripatetic. Ironically, both in the early *Contra Gentiles* and in the *Summa theologiae*, he attributes the error to the Platonists, as reported by "Gregorius Nyssenus." In fact, what he quotes is by a 4th-century bishop, Nemesius of Emesa. Thus, for Aquinas, what Maimonides knew to be the Peripatetic position, is called "the opinion of Plato." This opinion is spelled out as a three-fold providence. The first of the three is "that of the highest God who cares first and principally for spiritual things and then for the whole world through genera, species, and universal causes. The second is providence for individual things which come to be and pass away, and this care he [Plato] attributes to gods who circle the heavens, i.e. the separate substances who move the heavenly bodies in their cycles."³⁵

Aquinas gets the history more nearly correct in his *Exposition of the Divine Names*, which he probably composed during the same period when he was working on the *Summa theologiae*.³⁶ There, when commenting on Dionysius' comparison between praying and those in a boat who are pulling themselves by a cable towards a rock, he considers the relation between providence and prayer. Thomas sketches five positions: 1) "those who totally destroyed the providence of God, making all things happen by chance, this was the opinion of the Epicureans," 2) "those who posited the providence of God in respect to incorporeal things and universals, but subtracted divine providence from human affairs, and this was the opinion of some Peripatetics," 3) the opinion of the Stoics, extending divine providence to

³⁰ Alexander of Aphrodisias, *On Fate*, text, translation and commentary R.W. Sharples (London: Duckworth, 1983), XXX, 200.12-201.29, pp. 80–82, Sharples' notes at p. 165 which give the opposed doctrine of Proclus are very useful.

³¹ See Aquinas, *In duodecim libros Metaphysicorum Aristotelis Expositio*, ed. M.R. Cathala and R.M. Spiazzi (Turin / Rome: Marietti, 1964) 6.3 §§1202-1222, pp. 306–308 and 11.8 §2282, pp. 540–541, Aquinas works against extending an argument of Aristotle in respect to the accidental which "might seem to remove something which some posit on philosophical grounds, namely, fate and providence" (§1203). Certainly, Aristotle's argument will be used in that way—so, for example, it appears in *Conv.* V with that import—but Aquinas does not think it need have that force (§1203) and Aristotle himself does not ascribe this to it.

³² Proclus, *On Providence*, trans. Carlos Steel, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (London: Duckworth, 2007), §63, p. 70.

³³ Proclus, *De Prov.*, p. 90, note 277

³⁴ Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith, Summa Contra Gentiles, Book Three: Providence, Part I and II*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, Image Books (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), III.71.11, p. 241.

³⁵ Aquinas, *ST I.22.3*.

³⁶ On the dates, I follow Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Saint Thomas Aquinas: Volume 1, The Person and His Work*, revised edition, translated by Robert Royal (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2005).

everything, but making everything happen by necessity, so that all is fated, 4) the opinion of “some Egyptians” which made the providence of God mutable, 5) “the opinion of some Platonists who said that divine providence is immutable but that under it is contained some things which are mutable and contingent events.” Here Aquinas judges that only the Platonic position is correct in respect to both prayer and the nature of God. Providence is an immobile chain present everywhere in heaven and on earth enabling us, by prayer, to draw our mutable existence into the divine immutability.³⁷

In the *De Substantiis Separatis*, Aquinas stands with the Platonists and not only makes Aristotle’s teaching fit within their doctrine and finds a Neoplatonic solution to the Aristotelian problem, but also interprets Aristotle through Neoplatonic formulae so as to save him from the conclusions of those who called himself his disciples. Thomas’ solution belongs in the line of development stretching through Greek and Latin, pagan and Christian philosophical theologians which had its start in a doctrine of Porphyry: “All things are in all things, but in a mode appropriate to each; they are effectively in the intellect according to the mode of intellection, in the soul according to the mode of reason, in plants according to the mode of seeds, in bodies according to the mode of image, and in the Beyond according to the mode of unknowing and superessentiality.”³⁸ Aquinas uses the result of its development within the Neoplatonic school in Chapter Fourteen of the *De Substantiis Separatis*, “In which it is shown that God has knowledge of all things”: “The knowing of any knower is according to the mode of its substance; all the more so, the divine cognition, which is his substance, is according to the mode of his being. His being is one, simple, fixed and eternal; it follows that, by one simple intuition, God has an eternal and fixed knowledge of all things.”³⁹ Porphyry’s sentence and the formula developed from it are both hierarchical and, on this account, enable God to exercise providence over all and to do so without destroying the freedom of the rational creature.

From Boethius, dealing with determinist dilemmas in respect to providence and predestination in his *Consolation of Philosophy*, Thomas learned very early that cognition should be considered according to “a twofold mode.” He explains, in his commentary on the *Sentences*, that this is the case because “the mode of knowledge is not that of the thing known but of the knower”.⁴⁰ Dionysius and the *Liber de Causis* are also authoritative sources.⁴¹ In his *Exposition of Aristotle’s Metaphysics*, he opines that Plato knew the principle: “Plato saw that each thing is received in something else according to the capacity of the recipient.”⁴² Plato for him encompasses the Platonists. Ammonius, the younger pagan contemporary of Boethius, in his *Commentary on Aristotle’s De Interpretatione*, attributes to *divus* Iamblichus “that knowledge is intermediate between the knower and the known, since it is the activity of the knower concerning the known.”⁴³ Ammonius, like Boethius, is attempting to argue against the notion that divine providence abolishes the contingent and prayer. It is possible Aquinas

³⁷ Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus*, III, v, §§240-243, p. 75; Eric Perl kindly drew this passage to my attention.

³⁸ Porphyre, *Sentences*, Études d’introduction, texte grec et traduction français, commentaire, ed. Luc Brisson, tome 1, Histoire des doctrines de l’antiquité classique XXXIII (Paris: Vrin, 2005), Sentence 10, p. 310.

³⁹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 65, lines 31-39.

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *In Sententiarum*, lib. 1, d. 38, q. 1, a. 2 co.; Boethius, *Cons. V.iv pros. and met.*, especially, pp. 408–10, ll. 72-77. See also Aquinas, *Super Boetium De Trinitate*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, in *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. 50 (Rome / Paris: Commissio Leonina/ Cerf, 1992), Exp. Cap. Secundi, p. 133, lines 25-29.

⁴¹ Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus*, VII, iii, § 724, p. 271; idem, *Super De Causis*, on propositions 8, 11, 13.

⁴² Aquinas, *In Metaphysicorum*, I, iii, lect. 10, §167, p. 48.

⁴³ Ammonius, *On Aristotle’s On Interpretation 9*, Trans. D. Blank. With Boethius. *On Aristotle’s On Interpretation 9*. Ancient Commentators on Aristotle (Ithaca, N.Y. Cornell University Press, 1998), 135, lines 13-17, p. 98.

might also have found the formula in Moerbeke's translation of Ammonius' commentary which he used extensively in his *Expositio Libri Peryermeias*.

Simplicius describes Ammonias as his teacher and acquired many of his own conciliating arguments from this determined pursuer of *convenientia* from him.⁴⁴ Ammonius would also certainly have known the formula for relating knower and known from his teacher, Proclus, in whose works it occurs in several contexts, for example, in the *Elements of Theology* at Proposition 124 and elsewhere. The *Elements* is the source of its multiple occurrences in the *Liber de Causis*, where Aquinas found it yet again. Its context at Proposition 8 of the *Liber*, as in Proposition 124 of the *Elements*, is a problem imposed on those maintaining a hierarchy of knowers, the question of the knowledge by intelligences of what is above and below them. Its form is the general assertion that, because it is a substance, every intelligence knows according to the mode of its own substance. Aquinas, when commenting on Proposition 10 of the *Liber*, draws Dionysius, Augustine and Proclus into an accord on the matter. As a result, Thomas' perspective is that of an ordered unity and division between knower and known. The cosmos he assumes is a hierarchy of substances graded from the most simple to the least unified which is equally a hierarchy of forms of subjectivity. As we shall see later, making the hierarchy of subjectivities total requires an Aristotelianizing of Platonism, as Aquinas understood it, matching his Platonising of Aristotle.

A little further in this chapter of the *Treatise on Separate Substances*, we come to another Proclean conception essential to Thomas' doctrine of providence. First Aquinas argues for the equality of the divine knowledge and power: "when the substance of anything is known perfectly, it is necessary that its power (*virtus*) is perfectly known."⁴⁵ He goes on to conclude that God's power extends universally and with the greatest effectiveness:

His power extends to everything that in anyway is among things or is able to be, whether proper or common, immediately produced by the first cause or by the mediation of second causes, because the first cause acts more on the effect than the second cause does.⁴⁶

The notion of Proclus that the remote first cause is more a cause of an effect than the cause we directly observe, Aquinas found at the very beginning of the *Liber de Causis*. In his *Exposition*, confected with Moerbeke's translation of the *Elements* beside him, he traces its origin to propositions 56 and 57 of that work.⁴⁷ As in his *Exposition*, Aquinas argues in the *De Substantiis Separatis* "that all things exist more eminently in the first cause, which is God, than they do even in themselves" and, since they exist in God intelligibly in accord with his intellectual substance, "it is necessary that God knows all things most perfectly."⁴⁸ These Iamblichan and Proclean conceptions of the being of things in the First and how He knows and causes what is beneath Him, Aquinas proceeds to use to refute the Peripatetic denial of God's providential knowledge of sublunar individuals. God knows, and his power and care extend to, the most unworthy things, what is "*indignissimum*". The *aporiae* in the *Metaphysics* are interpreted through the doctrines of post Plotinian Neoplatonism so as to allow a complete

⁴⁴ Simplicius, *On Aristotle's "Physics 8.6-10"*, trans. R. McKirahan, *Ancient Commentators on Aristotle* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1363,8-1363,12, p. 153.

⁴⁵ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 65, lines 61-62.

⁴⁶ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 65, lines 66-71.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, prop. 1, pp. 5-8.

⁴⁸ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 65, lines 85-86.

providential care of the smallest while maintaining Aristotle's attribution of nobility to God. Because he understands everything else through the mode of his own substance "He is the most noble of beings."⁴⁹

Perhaps it is the general rule but, in any case, in Thomas' practice of *convenientia* between Plato and Aristotle, there is always a *quid pro quo*. If Aristotle must fit into the Neoplatonic hierarchy, Proclus must pay dues for the Platonists in return, even if that for which he pays results from a misinterpretation owed to looking at his system through Aristotelian spectacles! We have noted that, in respect to providence, Aquinas' Aristotle depends on the Platonists, both because they carry its care down to the smallest things, and provide it with more means of mediation by way of the kind and numbers of separate substances, and also because the Neoplatonic law conforming the thing known to the knower enables such a providential God to retain his nobility. The tribute required in return is that the Neoplatonic One and the divine henads are regarded as abstractions, forms in which the intellects of the subordinate separate substances participate, and that the Aristotelianism which imposed this false representation also gets to correct it.

In the *De Substantiis Separatis*, in accord with Aristotle's representation and criticism of Platonic epistemology to which he held throughout his writing, Thomas notes that, for the sake of enabling knowledge, the *Platonici* distinguished unchangeable intelligibles from the flux of sense and imagination, positing orders of separate forms upon which intellects depended.⁵⁰ In the Treatise, he depicts Plato as positing two *genera* of entities abstracted from sensible things in accord with two modes of intellectual abstraction: "mathematicals and universals which he called forms or ideas." There is a hierarchy in which mathematical are intermediate between the highest forms and sensibles.⁵¹ At the highest level are entities like unity itself, the good itself, intellect itself, and life itself. Overall, for Thomas, this way of solving the epistemological dilemma involved a false separation of the object from the subject of intellection and, in this mistaken way, the multitude of Platonic gods came into being. That is, "gods, which is what Plato called the separate intelligible forms", came to be separate from intellects.⁵²

For Aquinas, in fact, philosophical reason has no other real beginning of its knowing except from the sensible and no other modes of proceeding upward except abstraction and separation.⁵³ In consequence, the Platonists cannot avoid reproducing the sensible world in the intelligible realm: "For, since they are not able to arrive at knowledge of such substances except from sensible things, they supposed the former to be of the same species as the latter, indeed, better, to be their species".⁵⁴ In consequence, despite the beginning from intelligible reasons, which they supposed themselves to have made, ultimately the Platonists could not, in fact, escape determining the numbers of the separated intelligible forms from sensible things. The same is true about order. The "order of gods, that is, of ideal forms, has an order among its members corresponding to the order of the universality of forms."⁵⁵ Finally, for Aquinas, even the character of the Proclean One is determined by the nature of abstraction.

⁴⁹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 65, line 197.

⁵⁰ Aquinas, *In De Divinis Nominibus*, IV, iv, § 276, p. 88

⁵¹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 1, p. D 42, lines 94-104.

⁵² Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 4, p. D 47, lines 3-4.

⁵³ See L.-B. Geiger, *La Participation dans la philosophie de S. Thomas d'Aquin*, 2nd ed. Bibliothèque thomiste 23 (Paris : Vrin, 1953), 87.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Liber de Veritate Catholicae Fidei contra errores Infidelium seu "Summa contra Gentiles"*, ed. C. Pera, 4 vols. (Turin/ Rome: Marietti, 1961), lib. 2, cap. 92, § 1791, p. 263.

⁵⁵ Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, prop. 19, p. 106, lines 5-7.

The superessential unity of the Platonic Principle is entirely beyond being known because Thomas understands it as the abstracted form of unity placed above being. The Platonic first cause is unknowable because “it is beyond being to the degree that the essence of goodness and unity...even exceeds separated being itself.” In contrast, “according to the truth of things, the first cause is above being [only] in so far as it is the very infinite act of being.”⁵⁶ On this aspect of the kinds of separate substances, Aristotle’s parsimony is “more consonant with the Christian faith”. He does not need separate forms to explain how we know and “we do not posit other separate forms above the order of intellectual beings”. God himself contains all these formal perfections, and there is no order intermediate between him and knowing beings.⁵⁷ With not a little forcing and reshaping, Aristotle, Dionysius, Augustine, and the author of the *Liber* are brought into agreement on this against the Platonists.

When treating providence in the *De Substantiis Separatis* the Platonic forms are eliminated and Aristotle is invoked in order to make the spiritual substances participate in God according to an hierarchy of subjectivities. Thus Aquinas concludes Chapter Thirteen in this way:

The inferior separate intellects, which we call angels, understand each of themselves through their own essences; but, according to the Platonist positions, they understand other things through participation in the separate intelligible forms which they call gods; ...according to Aristotle’s principles, they understand other things partly through their own essence and partly through participation in the first intelligible who is God, from whom they participate in both being and knowing.⁵⁸

A little further on he tells us that, in respect to how angels receive their knowledge, the positions of Aristotle are “as the truth of things has it.”⁵⁹ Ironically, it is precisely Aquinas’ misrepresentation of the highest realities in the Proclean universe as abstract universals which, for him, prevents them providing the knowledge of individuals which the Platonic doctrine of providence requires. Aquinas argues, that if, in fact, it were the case that the higher the knowing power the more it would know a more abstract intelligible, the more imperfect it would be:

for to know something only universally is to know imperfectly and in mode midway between potency and act, but a higher cognition is called more universal because it extends to more individuals and knows singulars better.⁶⁰

Though his Aristotelian blinders and the lacuna in his knowledge hide the truth of the history from him, Aquinas agrees with the Neoplatonists that such extensive knowledge is proper to the divine intuition which is prior to the division of universal and individual. So, in treating providence, Plotinus asserts that Divine Intellect creates and governs without the ratiocination or choice which belong to soul and the human. Divine Mind produces without

⁵⁶ Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, prop. 6, p. 47, lines 8-22.

⁵⁷ Aquinas, *Super de Causis*, prop. 10, p. 67, line 19-p. 68, line 7. He makes much the same point at prop. 13, p. 83, lines 8-17.

⁵⁸ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 14, p. D 67, lines 210-219.

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 16, p. D 69, lines 91-92.

⁶⁰ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 16, p. D 68, lines 40-47.

leaving behind its unperturbed quietness.⁶¹ “All that is divine makes according to its nature; but its nature corresponds to its substance”.⁶² The motionless motion, or perfect activity, of the creative and providential Divine Mind, where being is thinking and thinking being, is timeless; this is eternity in the new Platonic sense as opposed to the Aristotelian indefinite. It is the simultaneous presence of all things. Because the All is present to providential mind in this way, Plotinus can maintain Plato’s doctrine:

We must conclude that the universal order is forever something of this kind [truly inescapable, truly justice, and wonderful wisdom] from the evidence of what we see in the All, how this order extends to everything, even to the smallest, and the art is wonderful which appears not only in the divine beings but also in the things which one might have supposed providence would have despised for their smallness.⁶³

For Plotinus providence belongs to *Nous*: “all that comes from intellect is providence”, but he also speaks of the gods: “the *logos* of providence is dear to the gods.”⁶⁴

With Proclus the gods come to the fore. Providence is not, as in Plotinus, the rational order in the quiet activity of God’s eternal knowing, rather it is the operation of the gods as *pro-noia*, above mind. We have come to what Aquinas misunderstood in Proclus, the divine henads and the individuality at the top of the cosmos, from which both the generic and the individual derive, grounding the care of the smallest at the bottom. The Successor of Plato writes:

The term *pro-noia* (pro-vidence or thinking in advance) plainly signifies the activity before the intellect, which must be attributed solely to the Good—for only the Good is more divine than intellect.⁶⁵

Providence belongs to the gods: “Providence is *per se* god, whereas fate is something divine, but not god.”⁶⁶ This anticipates the lapidary formula with which Eriugena closed his *De Predestinatione Dei*: “The predestination of god is god.”⁶⁷ Proclus expresses what the Neoplatonists and their followers like Aquinas agree against the Peripatetics:

Since the gods are superior to all things, they anticipate all things in a superior way, that is, in the manner of their own existence: in a timeless way what exists according to time, . . . in an incorporeal way the bodies, in a determinate way what is indeterminate, in a stable way what is unstable, and in an ungenerated way what is generated.⁶⁸

⁶¹ I use the Greek text of Henry and Schwyzer with Armstrong’s alterations in Plotinus, *Enneads*, III. 1-9, Ed. and trans. A.H. Armstrong, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Mass. / London: Harvard University Press / William Heinemann, 1967), *Ennead*, III.2.2, p. 48.

⁶² Plotinus, *Ennead*, III.2.13, p. 82.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead*, III.3.5, pp. 126-128.

⁶⁵ Proclus, *De Prov.* §7, p. 44.

⁶⁶ Proclus, *De Prov.* §14, p. 48.

⁶⁷ Eriugena, *De praed.* E.3.

⁶⁸ Proclus, *De Prov.* §64 p. 71; see also *Elements of Theology* Proposition 124.

With Boethius, we return in part to Plotinus. Providence belongs to the stable divine intuition, which “remaining still, anticipates and embraces your changes in one flash.”⁶⁹ The result of the combination of the Neoplatonic doctrine of eternity and of its perspectivism finds its classic expression in the *Consolatio*.

The generation of all things, the whole production of all changing natures, whatever is moved in any way, receive their causes, their order, and their forms because they are allotted to them from out of the stability of the divine mind. In the high citadel of its simplicity, the unchanging mind of God establishes a plan for the multitude of things. When this plan is thought in terms of the purity of God’s own understanding, it is called providence. When this same plan is thought of in terms of the manifold different movements which are the life of individual things, it is called fate by the ancients.⁷⁰

Providence embraces all things, all at once in one eternal vision which is equally possession and activity.

Our brief look at Proclus and Boethius has introduced the last feature of Neoplatonic hierarchy wrapped up with operation of providence which we shall consider in this essay: the superiority of providence to fate. Aquinas does not write about this in the *De Substantiis Separatis*, but it does belong to his doctrine.

D. Providence above Fate

The difference between providence and fate is implicit in something Aquinas teaches in the *De Substantiis Separatis* and we may take our leave of that Treatise by quoting it:

With respect to execution, providence seems to be so much the more perfect to the degree that the one exercising it moves as a more universal agent through more intermediaries and instruments.⁷¹

It is in the connection of unity and multiplicity that the ordered relation of providence and fate occurs.

The distinction between a higher providence and lower fate, nature, or government is inherited by Plotinus from Middle Platonists,⁷² but we find it in Alexander of Aphrodisias as well, and Plotinus has his treatment of fate in mind when he considers the topic. Plotinus gives the distinction its basic form among Neoplatonists, the difference between the order as one in the divine mind and as diverse in the multiplicity of things. Plotinus writes:

One thing results from all, and there is one providence; but it is fate beginning from the lower level; the upper is providence alone. For in the intelligible world all things are rational principle and above rational principle; for all are intellect and pure soul.⁷³

⁶⁹ Boethius, *Cons.* V.vi., p. 433, ll. 154-155.

⁷⁰ Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi., p. 356, l. 22-p. 358, l. 30.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 15, p. D 68, lines 64-69.

⁷² See A.H. Armstrong’s note at *Ennead*, III.3.5, p. 129.

⁷³ Plotinus, *Ennead*, III.3.5. p. 126, ll.15-17.

Iamblichus, for whom the gods contain and employ the material for the sake of human souls altogether descended into it, has a sense for the integrity of nature, how it is connected, and how it serves justice. Because, following Plotinus, physical movements depend upon immaterial intellectual activities, and secondary causes on primary ones, he subordinates fate to providence:

[T]o speak generally, the movements of destiny around the cosmos are assimilated to the immaterial and intellectual activities and circuits, and its order is assimilated to the good order of the intelligible and transcendent realm. And the secondary causes are dependent on the primary causes, and the multiplicity attendant upon generation on the undivided substance, and the whole sum of things subject to fate is thus connected to the dominance of providence. In its very substance, then, fate is enmeshed with providence, and fate exists by virtue of the existence of providence, and it derives its existence from it and within its ambit.⁷⁴

In the distinction within the order, fate is on the side of movement, multiplicity, and the corporeal. However, it is also the connection between things and, in the progress of Neoplatonic thought, fate is more and more seen through the dominance of providence and as its instrument in leading the soul towards virtue, freedom, and the gods.

Systematising, the divine Proclus proceeds in the same way as his predecessors and gives providence the ruling power. Providence and fate

are both causes of the world and of the things that take place in the world. However, providence precedes fate, and everything that comes about according to fate comes about far more according to providence. The converse, however, is not true... [M]any things escape fate, but nothing providence.⁷⁵

Providence rules the intelligible and the sensible realms, fate the sensible. Thus, “Providence is to be distinguished from fate as god differs from what is divine, [i.e.] divine by participation and not primarily”⁷⁶ Because, as we have seen, the higher is more a cause than the cause immediately proximate to the effect, providence is at work in fate. Crucially, for Proclus, this priority and dominance of providence is for the sake of anagogy:

Events that fall under fate also fall under providence: they have their interconnection from fate, but their orientation to the good from providence. Thus, the connection will have the good as its end and providence will order fate.⁷⁷

Boethius produces the doctrine of Iamblichus and Proclus, often in the same words and with images and ratios to help our understanding. He pushes further the service of fate to the ends of providence. As we have seen, for Lady Philosophy, the distinction between providence and fate is primarily a matter of perspective:

⁷⁴ Iamblichus, To Macedonius, On Fate, Fr. 4, p. 23, in Iamblichus of Chalcis, *The Letters*, trans. J.M. Dillon and W. Polleicher (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2009).

⁷⁵ Proclus, *De Prov.* §3, p. 42.

⁷⁶ Proclus, *De Prov.* §14, p. 48.

⁷⁷ Proclus, *De Prov.* §13, p. 47.

It will easily be understood that providence or fate are two very different ways of looking at things if we consider what distinct force our vision gives each of them. For providence is the very divine reason itself in the highest principle of all, disposing everything, but fate is a disposition inherent in movable things, through which providence binds all things together, each in its own proper ordering.⁷⁸

With such an identity, experiencing the character of fate or fortune, the way things are connected in the sensible world, by entering fortune's realm through practice is necessary to the rise of the soul. Although providence brings us to freedom through or in the abiding intuition of the simple good, she brings us there through practice, and the result is not intuition separate from activity. As his Neoplatonic predecessors also taught, in happiness, for Boethius, we become gods by participation.⁷⁹

When we look at reality in terms of providence, we see what embraces all things, all at once, however different each thing may be, however varied and even opposed their motions. Simultaneity and immediacy are the modes of providence which always works in the same way, giving itself as completely to each creature as each one is able and willing to receive infinite goodness.⁸⁰ When, in contrast, we look at reality in terms of fate or fortune, we see a series of different dispersed motions of beings with inherent ends. These constitute each of the individuals of the universe assigned as they are to their own appropriate places and times. Binding these individuals and their motions together requires the hierarchy of spiritual agents, separate substances of various kinds at which we have looked earlier. Lady Philosophy suggests their kinds and modes in a brief sketch of what was treated more extensively by Iamblichus and Proclus and would be again by Aquinas:

Providence and fate are different, but the one hangs upon the other....things which God constructs by his providence are worked out by fate in many ways and in time. By whatever means fate operates, either by certain divine spirits who are servants of providence, or whether its course is woven together by soul or by the whole of nature or by the celestial motions of the stars or by angelic power or by the diverse skills of daemons, one thing is certain, namely that providence is the unchangeable simple form of all creation, while fate is the movable interlacing and temporal ordering of the activities which the divine simplicity has placed in being.⁸¹

Despite the use of fate by providence, we can rise above it and its endless motion:

Everything which is subject to fate is also subject to providence, to which fate is itself subject. But there are things which, though beneath providence, are above the chain of fate. These are things which rise above the course of the movement of fate in virtue of the stability of their position fixed nearest God.⁸²

⁷⁸ Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi., p. 358, ll. 31-35; on fate as the immanent order see also Iamblichus, *To Sopater, On Fate*, Fr. 1.

⁷⁹ Boethius, *Cons.* II.i, p. 178, ll. 45-49 and III.x, p. 280, ll. 88-90.

⁸⁰ See Dionysius, *The Divine Names* IV.5 and, on the same in Plotinus, Eric Perl, "The Power of All Things: The One as Pure Giving in Plotinus," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* LXXI:3 (1997): 301-313.

⁸¹ Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi., p. 358, l. 42- p. 360, l. 60.

⁸² Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi., p. 360, ll. 61-66.

The practical, one might say the saving, use of this distinction, comes out in the last point and we shall return to it later.

In the *Contra Gentiles*, Aquinas quotes Boethius and explains the text:

Boethius says: “Fate is a disposition inherent in movable things, through which providence binds all things together, each in its own proper ordering.” In this description of fate “disposition” is put for “ordering,” while the phrase “inherent in things” is used to distinguish fate from providence; for the ordering as it is in the divine mind, not yet impressed on things, is “providence”; but inasmuch as it is already explicated in creatures, it is called “fate.” He says “in moveable things” to show that the order of providence does not take away from things their contingency and mutability. In this understanding, to deny fate is to deny divine providence. But, because with unbelievers we ought not even to have names in common, lest from agreement in terminology there be taken an occasion of error, the faithful should not use the name of “fate,” not to appear to fall in with those who construe fate wrongly, subjecting all things to the necessity imposed by the stars.⁸³

In the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas quotes Boethius on providence (“the very divine reason itself in the highest principle of all, disposing everything”), a definition immediately preceding the definition of fate he had quoted a decade earlier in the *Contra Gentiles*.⁸⁴ Thomas distinguishes this *ratio* in the divine mind from its working in the things ordered without giving the reason inherent in things a proper name. However, Aquinas subsequently distinguishes “government” as temporal from providence as eternal; government is “disposition and execution.”⁸⁵ Differentiating government allows the use of intermediaries and “communicating to creatures the dignity of causing.”⁸⁶ At the end of the question on providence, Aquinas rearranges the words of the *Consolation* to give this description of fate in an objection: “it comes forth from the utterances of unmovable providence to bind together human actions and fortunes in an unbreakable chain of causes.” In the reply to the objection, he takes no umbrage at the term “fate” and approves the doctrine because the necessity involved belongs to the “certainty” of providence, not to the mode of the effects themselves, which, when appropriate, retain their contingency.⁸⁷ Divine providence also produces necessary things, working, Neoplatonically one might say in the works of Aquinas, “to bring forth every grade of things.”⁸⁸

Although in a long consideration of the matter in the *De Substantiis Separatis* he sides with Dionysius, Augustine and the Platonists in refusing to make the daemons evil by nature, neither when quoting Boethius, for whom the ingenuity of daemons plays a role, nor when considering the crucial work of angels in Divine providence or government, does Aquinas give them a positive operation.⁸⁹ In this, he separates himself from the tradition beginning at least with Iamblichus for whom: “when it is natural forces that are the causes, it is a daemon

⁸³ Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles*, Textum Leoninum emendatum ex plagulis de prelo Taurini 1961 editum ac automato translatum a Roberto Busa SJ in taenias magneticas denuo recognovit Enrique Alarcón atque instruxit, lib. 3 cap. 93 nn.5-6.

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *ST I.22.1 corpus*.

⁸⁵ Aquinas, *ST I.22.1 ad 2*.

⁸⁶ Aquinas, *ST I.22.3 corpus*.

⁸⁷ Aquinas, *ST I.22.4 obj 3 and ad 3*.

⁸⁸ Aquinas, *ST I.22.4 corpus*.

⁸⁹ Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 20, pp. D 76- D 77.

(sc. that presides).”⁹⁰ Proclus elaborates their role in the fourth of the *Ten Problems concerning Providence*.⁹¹ There they are among intermediary beings working to establish contact between providence and unstable things. This is not because Aquinas disputes their existence; indeed, he sides on that with Augustine and the Platonists against the Peripatetic followers of Aristotle.⁹²

Aquinas is compelled to this deprivation of the daemons because, among Christians, they have become malicious.⁹³ There is, nonetheless, a loss. While Aquinas makes the fundamental distinctions required for the difference between fate and providence discerned by his predecessors, in the move from fate to government, there is a slippage in the direction of immediate divine causation of everything. Thomas Gilby’s learned and extraordinarily compact summary of the debate *de Auxiliis*, arising out of Thomas’ endeavour to hold the necessity in providence apart from the freedom in things, brings out how positions comparable to those of Calvinists developed in the modern Thomist schools.⁹⁴ If there be no daemoniac realm of fate, despite other intermediaries, a step has been made towards the dissolution of hierarchy and seeing God as the immediate cause of everything. This reduces the analogy which the hierarchical relation between providence and fate served. To recollect that in closing, let us remember the end providence seeks and what Neoplatonic hierarchy serves.

E. What Providence serves

As parts of their consideration of providence or fate, all the Peripatetic and Neoplatonic thinkers we have mentioned labour to show that, because we have rational souls, we are in some degree free.⁹⁵ As Iamblichus puts it: “the origin of action in us is both independent of Nature and emancipated from the movement of the universe.”⁹⁶ Proclus continues in the same vein; we must not

deprive the soul of the power of choice, since it has its very being precisely in this, in choosing, avoiding this, running after that, even though, as regards events, our choice is not master of the universe.⁹⁷

Providence presupposes that freedom. So Plotinus writes:

The divine has come to something other than itself, not to destroy the other but, when a man, for instance, comes to it, it stands over him and sees that he is a man,

⁹⁰ Iamblichus, To Macedonius, On Fate, Fr. 5, *Letters*, p. 25.

⁹¹ Proclus, *Dix problèmes concernant la providence*, ed. D. Isaac (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1977), IV.25.

⁹² See in addition to the *De Substantiis Separatis*, Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae De Malo*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. 23 (Rome / Paris: Commissio Leonina / Vrin, 1982), 16.1, which was written at the same time as the Treatise and has the same content and the slightly earlier *Sententia Libri Ethicorum*, ed. Fratrum Praedicatorum, *Opera Omnia iussu Leonis XIII P.M. edita*, vol. 47, pars 1 and 2 (Rome: Commissio Leonina, 1969) ii, 4.7, p. 222, ll. 18-32.

⁹³ Aquinas, *ScG* lib. 3 caps 105-110 and *De Substantiis Separatis*, cap. 20.

⁹⁴ See note f in St Thomas Aquinas, *God’s Will and Providence* (Ia. 19-26), *Summa Theologiae, Volume 5*, ed and trans. Thomas Gilby (London / New York: Blackfriars, 1967), pp. 104–5.

⁹⁵ See Plotinus, *Ennead*, III.1, Proclus, *De Prov.* §§57-61, Boethius, *Cons.* IV & V.

⁹⁶ Iamblichus, To Macedonius, On Fate, Fr. 4, *Letters*, pp. 23–25.

⁹⁷ Proclus, *De Prov.* §36, p. 58.

that is, that he lives by the law of providence, which means doing everything its law says.⁹⁸

Nonetheless, having taken the human and its limited freedom into account, providence also operates to transform it so as to raise us to divinity. So Aquinas speaks for all when, in introducing the question on providence in the *Summa theologiae*, he says that “it cares for all things but especially the ordering of humans to eternal salvation.”⁹⁹

How the divine can help us, maintain our freedom, and the order of the universe is mysterious. Following the teaching of Plotinus,¹⁰⁰ Iamblichus writes to Poemenius:

The gods, in upholding fate, direct its operation throughout the universe; and this sound direction of theirs brings about sometimes a lessening of evils, sometimes a mitigation of their effects, on occasion even their removal. On this principle, then, fate is disposed to the benefit of the good, but in this disposing does not reveal itself fully to the disorderly nature of the realm of generation....This being the case, both the goodness of providence and the freedom of choice of the soul, and all the best elements of reality are vindicated, kept in being together by the will of the gods.¹⁰¹

Proclus is with Iamblichus in insisting on the need for what is *exotiben*. Proclus gives divine grace a role in our acquisition of virtues:

since even the person who has virtue is only subservient to those capable of providing him with what he desires and increasing it together with him. These are the gods, among whom true virtue is found and from whom comes the virtue in us. And Plato too in some texts calls this willing slavery the greatest freedom. For by serving those who have power over all, we become similar to them, so that we govern the whole world.¹⁰²

Having explained that choice is proper to humans, by it they follow appearances and can do evil, he asserts that they can come also to be governed by will. Will is unwaveringly directed to the rational good and is the proper possession of divine beings. With the divine help we can attain the Platonic promise:

For a willed life is in accordance with the good and it makes what depends on us extremely powerful and it is really godlike: thanks to this life the soul becomes god and governs the whole world, as Plato says.¹⁰³

Boethius too labours to maintain both providence and freedom so that by prayer the divine and the human can meet. He concludes the *Consolation* with this affirmation and exhortation:

⁹⁸ See *Ennead*, Plotinus, III.2.9, p. 72, ll. 5-9.

⁹⁹ Aquinas, *ST I*, prologue to QQ. 22-24.

¹⁰⁰ See Plotinus, *Ennead*, III.3.2-4.

¹⁰¹ Iamblichus, To Poemenius, *On Providence (?)*, Fr. 1, *Letters*, p. 33. For the mysterious character of this aid see also Proclus, *De Prov.* §§64-65, Boethius, *Cons.* IV.vi, p. 370, ll. 196-200, quoting Homer.

¹⁰² Proclus, *De Prov.* §24, p. 53.

¹⁰³ Proclus, *De Prov.* §60, p. 69.

Hope and prayers are not placed in God in vain; if they are of the right kind, they must be efficacious. Turn away from vices, cultivate virtues, lift up your mind to the right hopes, and put forth humble prayers on high.¹⁰⁴

No doctrine is more characteristic of Aquinas than the hierarchical leading of an assumed human rational nature by grace to divinization, and in this also he follows Neoplatonic patterns and doctrines.¹⁰⁵ I end by a brief reference to one of these which I have chosen because it unites consideration of the divine, the angelic, and the human in possessing and mediating virtue.

The philosopher Aquinas finds referred to in the *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* as “Plotinus, inter philosophiae professores cum Platone princeps”¹⁰⁶ helps demonstrate that “a heroic or divine *habitus* does not differ from virtue as it is commonly spoken of except that it is possessed in a more perfect mode.”¹⁰⁷ What Aquinas takes as being from Plotinus enables a hierarchical community to be established between virtue in Christ and virtue in other humans so that grace can flow from him to them. Thomas’ conception of the operation of divine grace as deriving to humans through Christ’s humanity, “an instrument animated by a rational soul which is so acted upon as to act”,¹⁰⁸ continues his building up of the rational human, described at the beginning of the *Secunda Pars* as “principle of its own works as having free will and power over its own works.”¹⁰⁹ Because the humanity of Christ is united to the divinity “through the medium of intelligence”,¹¹⁰ “our union with God [by grace] is through activity according as we know and love him.”¹¹¹ Thomas tirelessly repeats: “Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.”¹¹² Grace in Thomas strengthens the human rational power, freedom, and moral virtues.

The text Macrobius, and, on his authority, Aquinas, ascribe to Plotinus is, in fact, from Porphyry.¹¹³ He summarised and schematized what he found in Plotinus “On Virtues.”¹¹⁴ Thomas continued to use what he attributes to Plotinus in his *Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus*, which was completed at the end of the period in which he wrote the *De Substantiis Separatis* (1271-72).¹¹⁵ Macrobius is not, however, his only Neoplatonic

¹⁰⁴ Boethius, *Cons.* V.vi, p. 434, ll. 170-174.

¹⁰⁵ See my “Philosophy as Way of Life for Christians? Iamblichan and Porphyrian Reflections on Religion Virtue and Philosophy in Thomas Aquinas,” *Laval Théologique et Philosophique* 59:2 [Le Néoplatonisme] (Juin 2003): 193–224.

¹⁰⁶ Aquinas, *ST I-II*.61.5 *sed contra*.

¹⁰⁷ Aquinas, *ST III*.7.2 *ad 2*.

¹⁰⁸ Aquinas, *ST III*.7.1 *ad 3*.

¹⁰⁹ Aquinas, *ST I-II*, prologus.

¹¹⁰ Aquinas, *ST III*.6.2 *corpus*.

¹¹¹ Aquinas, *ST III*.6.6 *ad 1*.

¹¹² For example at Aquinas, *ST I*.1.8 *ad 2*.

¹¹³ See Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, trans. W.H. Stahl, *Records of Civilization, Sources and Studies* 48 (New York : Columbia University Press, 1952), 121, note 3 and S. Gersh, *Middle Platonism and Neoplatonism: The Latin Tradition*, 2 vol., *Notre Dame Studies in medieval studies* 23 (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1986), ii, pp. 508–509, note 91. For a discussion see J.P. Hochschild, “Porphyry, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas: A Neoplatonic Hierarchy of Virtues and Two Christian Appropriations,” *Medieval Philosophy and the Classical Tradition in Islam, Judaism and Christianity*, edited by John Inglis (Richmond [England]: Curzon Press, 2002), 245–259.

¹¹⁴ Plotinus, *Ennead* I.2

¹¹⁵ Aquinas, *Quaestio Disputata de Virtutibus Cardinalibus* in *Quaestiones Disputatae*, 2 vols. (Turin/Rome: Marietti, 1965), ii, 1.2.

source for this hierarchical ordering of the virtues. When, in the *Prima Secundae* of the *Summa theologiae* Thomas asks “Whether there is *habitus* in the angels?”, in order to give an affirmative answer, he turns to the *Commentary on the Categories of Aristotle* by Simplicius. There he finds that “Wisdom which is a habit in the soul, is substance in intellect. For all divine realities are sufficient to themselves and exist in themselves.” And, “the habits of intellectual substances are not like those habits here, but they more like simple and immaterial forms which the substance contains in itself.”¹¹⁶ In this article, Simplicius is found to accord with Maximus the Confessor and with Dionysius. Further, in the same place, the principle by which the mode of a rational substance and the mode of its acts are brought into agreement is derived from the *Liber de Causis*: “so far as it is in act, [an intellectual substance] is able to understand some things through its own essence, at least itself, and other things according to the mode of its own substance.”¹¹⁷

The doctrine which Aquinas derives from Porphyry in opposition to Aristotle (for whom, as Aquinas tells us, to attribute political virtues to God is ridiculous¹¹⁸) enables the moral virtues of prudence, temperance, courage, and justice to be attributed in different modes to God, angels, and humans, to different states and stages of human life, and to different powers of action. The net result is that Aquinas can move to the theological or infused virtues of faith, hope, and charity, without reducing what is below to what is above. As Joshua Hochschild puts it:

it allows us to understand how human “lives” that can be differentiated can still be necessarily related: the political and the contemplative man are engaged in different activities, but both are engaged in human activities, and so the same virtues are actualized in them according to different modes.¹¹⁹

Another use of the Porphyrian hierarchy of virtues appears when Aquinas asks “Whether there is justice in God?”¹²⁰ At the end of the *respondeo* the authority of Dionysius is invoked:

Just as the right order of a family or of any kind of governed multitude is demonstrated in the distributive justice of the one who governs, so also the order of the universe, manifested both in natural and moral beings, sets forth God’s justice. Accordingly, Dionysius says: “We ought to see that God is truly just in that he grants what is proper to all things according to the rank of each of them and preserves the nature of each one in the order and with the powers that properly belong to it.”¹²¹

By the operation of providence, distributive justice rules the universe ordered from the top down: “God’s justice has to do with what befits him, inasmuch as he renders to himself what is his due.” Outside the divinity itself this self-relation demands order; each must have what

¹¹⁶ Aquinas, *STI-II.50.6 corpus*. Simplicius, *Commentaire sur les Catégories d’Aristote*, De Qualitate, ii, pp. 330-331, ll. 81-94. This *Commentary* is also employed elsewhere in Aquinas’ ethics, see Vivian Boland, “Aquinas and Simplicius on Dispositions - A Question in Fundamental Moral Theory,” *New Blackfriars* 82: 968 (October 2001): 467-478.

¹¹⁷ Aquinas, *STI-II.50.6 corpus*.

¹¹⁸ Aquinas, *STI-II.61.5 obj. 1* and *ad 1*.

¹¹⁹ Hochschild, “Porphyry, Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas,” 253.

¹²⁰ Aquinas, *STI.21.1*.

¹²¹ Aquinas, *STI.21.1*. He refers to *Dionysius, VIII cap. De. Div. Nom.*

is due to it in a hierarchy: “to each is due what is ordained for it in the order of the divine wisdom.”¹²²

So we return to the order of Divine Wisdom with which we began. It is hierarchical. This view of order is, as I noted at the beginning, fundamental to Thomas thinking and he takes it up willingly from his Neoplatonic predecessors.

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¹²² Aquinas, *STI.21.1 ad 3*.